

Influenza Fact Sheet

What is influenza?

Influenza is commonly referred to as "the flu." It is a viral infection of the lungs. There are two main types of influenza virus: A and B. Each type includes many different strains.

When does influenza occur?

Influenza occurs most often in the late fall and winter months in the United States.

Who gets influenza? How is it spread?

Anyone can get influenza, but it is most serious in young children, the elderly, in people with chronic illnesses (e.g., lung disease, heart disease, cancer, or diabetes) or those with weak immune systems. Influenza spreads easily in discharges from the nose or throat, usually when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear? What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 3 days after exposure. Influenza symptoms can include a sudden onset of fever, headache, chills, cough, sore throat, and body aches. Diarrhea is not common. Although most people are ill for less than a week, some people have complications and may need to be hospitalized.

How is influenza diagnosed and treated?

Some laboratory tests are available to diagnose influenza; however, doctors usually diagnose influenza from the person's symptoms. Rest, liquids, and over-the-counter medicine (e.g., acetaminophen [Tylenol®]) are the usual treatments. Some prescription drugs may reduce the severity of influenza. Aspirin should not be given to children with fever-causing illnesses because of the possibility of a complication called Reye's syndrome.

How long can a person spread influenza?

Influenza can spread from one person to another beginning about one day before symptoms appear through about a week after onset.

Who should be vaccinated against influenza?

All persons who want to reduce the risk of becoming ill with influenza or of transmitting it to others (and do not have a contraindication) should receive an influenza vaccination each year. Yearly vaccination is important because: 1) influenza strains change from year to year, and 2) immunity gained from the vaccine decreases over time.

Particular effort should be made to immunize people at higher risk for influenza infection or complications. This includes all children aged 6 months-18 years, all persons aged ≥ 50 years, and:

- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season;
- Residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities;
- People who have long-term heart or lung problems, including asthma; and,
- People who have other serious medical conditions, such as kidney disease, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, anemia, cancer, weak immune systems (including those with HIV), or a seizure disorder.

To help prevent the spread of influenza to people in high risk groups, those who live with people in a high risk group and healthcare workers who provide care to high risk patients should also receive an annual influenza shot. Travelers to countries outside of the U.S. may also need to consider influenza vaccination.

What are other steps that can be taken to prevent the spread of influenza?

Good health habits can help prevent influenza. These include covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing; washing your hands often to help protect yourself from germs; avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth; staying home from work, school, and errands when you are sick; and avoiding close contact with people who are sick. Antiviral medications may also be used to prevent or treat influenza, but are not a substitute for vaccination. For more information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website (www.cdc.gov/flu/) or talk to a healthcare professional.